

**Black Box: an iconoclastic provocation or a quantum leap in strategic thinking?.**

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The knowledge accumulation syndrome in times of globalisation

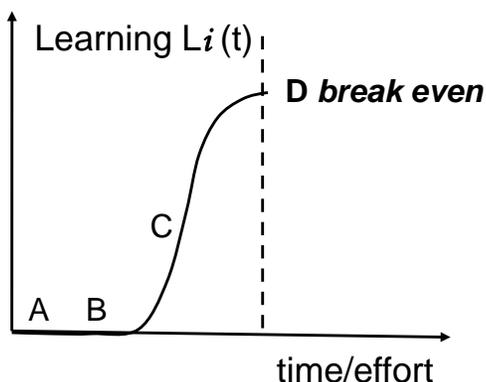
Globalization is not merely internationalisation to a higher extent and it needs a new and specific know how and a greater variety of complex managerial skills and tools. The proliferation of different theories, models and techniques also requires a continual effort to integrate and keep this large body of knowledge congruent. This process of *generation-integration* has been led by a paradigm based upon the assumption that “*the more we know, the better*”. The management and leadership disciplines also tend to adopt this philosophy and search for powerful methods and instruments in order to *understand, predict and control* the human phenomena which affect the organization’s results. According to Robèrt (2002), a Swedish expert of social sustainability, every time we create an accumulation of resources in a short space of time and in a close space, we also set up conditions of risk for the economic and, more generally, for the human environment. This phenomenon can be verified for physical resources (like material goods, for example oil or chemical reagents). The social concentration also leads to similar problems as megalopolis sometimes prove. Perhaps financial concentration also generates a critical status, which could move both positive and negative energies. In this line of thought, could the accumulation of knowledge also be affected by this risk? Would the sophistication and the variety of our managerial theories and derived practices jeopardise the conduct of our organizations and undermine our globalizing society? Are there new visions and founding principles for the managerial knowledge that we can develop and apply to avoid this risk? Can a defensive policy towards this danger generate new and unexpected opportunities for future managers ?

This paper will consider the phenomenon of the knowledge accumulation risk and propose an answer both to the worries and the hopes linked to it. The core of this proposal resides in the concept of the Black Box.

## 2. Classic learning models: the S-curve.

For the aims of this paper, it is useful to re-analyse the process of the managers cultural growth (Vance, 1993). The route managers take to acquire their necessary background and competence is probably showing both its limits and the need to be re-conceived. The classic learning process could be represented by an *S-curve*, where on the X axis there is the time (and the associated effort of the teacher or of the teaching system) and on the Y axis we put the “amount learned” ( $L_i$ ) of a  $i$  discipline (Figure 1).

### Classic learning curve (S-Type)



**Figure 1: Classic learning curve (S-Type)**

A few salient zones of this learning process representation:

**Zone A.** At the starting point the knowledge of the specific discipline is small or zero. A new discipline is better learned when the learner does not have yet accumulation of that matter. If this is not the case (as would normally happen) a pre-emptive work to *clean the mind* from the

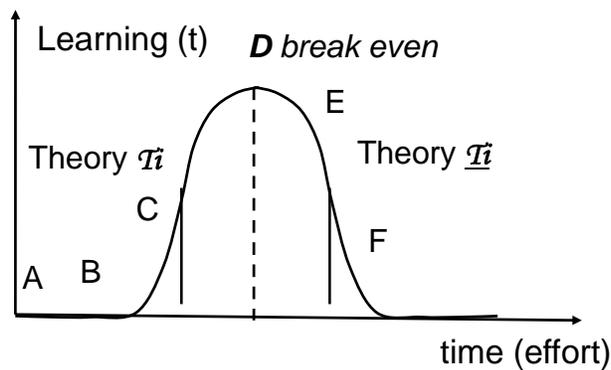
prejudice of the already known stuff is useful. This clean mind condition can justify the success of students coming from a different culture background. The perceived arrogance of some managers which operates in foreign countries is due to the fact that “they have already studied the culture they are going to deal with”. Just recall the classic Zen tale, where a wise teacher tries to pour tea into an already filled cup of a presumptuous student (Reps & Senzaki, 1958). There is then a zone of *initial resistance* (**B**), where the learner doesn't make significant progress, as he tends to rise conscious and unconscious barriers. This resistance is a signal to the teacher that the matter is worth it for the learner. No resistance is as dangerous as an obstinate resistance. The resistance could even be created artfully, by the same learner. In the biblical Commentary it is said: “when you study, find a companion which will act as your opponent during your learning and understanding”, and this is in order to contrast a too easy learning. After the resistance phase, we enter the accumulation zone (**C**), where the slope shows a progressively growing learning. In fact, after the initial resistance a form of agreement is established, a psychological contract between the learner and the teacher. This unless the student withdraws, which anyway solves the problem of resistance (be careful, in this case, to avoid the educational obstinacy, which is not so rare in our organizations and pedagogical systems). But, inexorably, a flex appears, an efficiency decline, until the plateau is reached (zone **D**): the saturation flat. This is the *break-even point*, where the learner reaches the teacher, the son reaches his father, the subordinate his boss. Strangely enough, some managers are afraid of this clue regarding the success of their subordinates (and their own, primarily) and they adopt some counter measures to impede the event. However, once this peak is reached, the absolute maximum, there is no reason (not economically but maybe affective) to carry on learning. New S-curves will then follow, accumulating knowledge on knowledge, just with the precaution to start the next curve from zero. In this vision, innovation is a sequence of S-curves, and the more

they are mutually independent the more *creative* is the overall result. Managers and organizations also typically follow this process when learning and teaching a new discipline. It is called *instruction* (from the Latin verb *instruo* which has the same root as input, i.e. putting inside). The instruction phase can also be performed by a computer or through more sophisticated machines acting as instructors. *E-learning* is one of its most promising evolutions and yet some institutions adopt this form of instruction together with the classic ones.

### 3. Beyond the S-Curve: the Gauss's function

This paper proposes to prolong the previous learning curve, with an evolution which recalls the Gaussian profile. Note that it can be obtained by symmetry of the previous S-curve (Figure 2)

**The proposed learning curve (Gaussian shape)**



**Figure 2: The proposed learning curve (Gaussian shape type)**

Let's focus on the break-even point, where the learner reaches the teacher's level (or more generally the teaching system) as far as that discipline is concerned, nullifying his further instructional effort. Now, a new phase arrives where the teacher (the same person or preferably a new one) operates in order to start the declining curve of the learning process. Despite the

initial resistance of the learner (Zone **E**, or the *attachment to accumulation*), the knowledge previously acquired is then progressively neutralised (**F**), till the achievement of the Zero level (**G**). The last residuals are particularly resistant. The phenomenon doesn't consist in forgetting, it is rather a form of behavioral independence from the influence of the acquired knowledge. This phase is called *education* (from Latin *ex duco*, the same root of exit, meaning to get rid of, to leave). If instruction is to put in, education is to take out. The educating phase is evident in a child's development, when the parents decide to reduce the control on him and remove some of the constraints operating till that moment.

Are we generating procedures for our collaborators that have an expiry date, like yoghurt or credit cards? If our procedures and specifications become, on the contrary, more and more pervasive and stringent, even when they are not necessary any longer, we are missing our role of educators and they skip the responsibility experience. Education and responsibility could be considered, operationally, as synonymous. The business world we are going to face will need a lot of instruction, and we are very sensitive and generous in building and providing theories, techniques and methods to our students and employees (and to ourselves). Unfortunately very rarely do we actuate a conscious and scientific way to educate, as it is intended here. By the way, while the instruction part can be given by a machine the education part needs a real man, or woman (but preferably both; a double gender is crucial in people's development, as they cannot be totally integrated). If we think in terms of efficiency, our organizational culture cannot bear this economic blasphemy to invest time and money to train our managers, first to learn and subsequently to unlearn and the cost is doubled because of the symmetry of our curve.

### **3.1 The Eastern orientation toward education**

The oriental cultures are more inclined to the education phase, for reasons which are rooted in their history, know how, sociology or religion (Watts, 1995). When I introduced this concept to a

class of a Chinese American professor of strategy, she commented with a smile: “thanks for reminding me the forgotten pleasure of unlearning”. In our culture the attachment to accumulation, whatever the matter is, money, status or culture, it is inevitably built in our mentality. It is interesting to consider a crucial Japanese (and Chinese) ideogram: (Figure 3)

**Mu (wo): a complex way to say *nothing***



*(by kind permission of E. Taigô Fumagalli,  
Master of Sho-Do, way of calligraphy)*

***Figure 3: Mu: a complex way to say nothing***

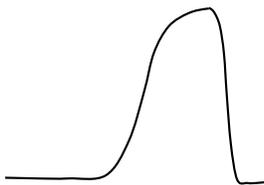
Probably for most of you this means nothing.

Well, its meaning is exactly **nothing, zero, without** (*mu* in Japanese, *wo* in Chinese)

But this *absence*, “which makes everything possible” (words of a Chinese manager in a German biotech Company), is the result of a more complex process, which recalls our instruction-education curve: the fire (the four vertical lines under the base) burned the trees (the four lines over the base ) and what then remained was **nothing**. The message is not nihilist. We have to learn a discipline in depth to the highest possible level in order to eventually neutralise it with another effort. Under this condition, what has been learned is then safely applicable. The peak level of the Gaussian curve is a situation of extreme danger: when the knowledge, the skill, the mastery of a determined discipline is at its maximum (and you are a medical doctor, an engineer, a judge or a manager), you and the world around you run a high risk. In this state it is very easy

to become arrogant and blinded by the slavery to a discipline and to make serious mistakes, sometimes fatal. This dependence on knowledge could lead you to stop thinking and letting the acquired know how decide for you. Normally, even though unofficially, the organizations are aware of this situation of danger. At an Italian power company, the manager for safety told us that the peak of serious injuries happened when the technicians and operators had become very skilled and once they had achieved a high level of competence. Rarely were new workers affected by this problem in the first period of their activity. A large European food company used to welcome its talented newly hired people by giving them an obligatory task: for three months they were travelling in the passenger seat of a truck which was delivering perishable goods to small food shops in remote areas of the country. They were requested by the driver, which had a significantly lower level of education, to help him in very basic jobs like loading and unloading, cashing the money, disposing of products on shelters; they were exposed to the tough aspects of the business. It was a sort of an initiation ritual, in our scheme a tough (and not too efficient but effective) educating curve: rarely could they count on their MBAs to solve the problems in those three months. Unlearning is then as important as learning but less theorized, although practiced in the Western culture, most of the times abruptly, (and a bit brutally), sacrificing the requisite symmetry of the Gaussian curve (Figure 4)

**Sudden decline of the learning curve**



*Figure 4 :Sudden decline of the learning curve*

### **3.2 And now, new paradigms?**

We are probably going towards a new paradigm where “the more we know, the better” is not always as appropriate as in the past. However, as it will be explained in the following section, its destiny is not to replace the previous one. Instead of knowing in advance as much as possible, for the new paradigm we should become *more sensitive and flexible* and learn in real time with the problem or the opportunity, and be able to unlearn shortly after. This would avoid the risky accumulation of learning peaks. It is easy to demonstrate that sensitivity and flexibility are reduced or even blocked when we are at the break even peak and that a continuous accumulation can really make us *blind and deaf*. As a non American, I could advice the US managers to not learn too much of the economic and social reality of the countries and cultures they have to interact with. The conceptual shift is *from learning to be prepared to preparing to learn*.

### **3.3 How can we educate?**

If this dissertation has convinced some readers, the question is then inevitable: what are the techniques and strategies to accompany the learner correctly on the falling slope of education? Do these methods exist? How can we learn them? How can they be applied to organizations? Again, the classic managerial culture makes the problem harder for us. The *non attachment-non refusal principle* of Buddhism, for example, could be a helpful mind frame to adopt or at least to try. Not refusing, you receive instruction, not attaching, education is realized. One acceptable compromise is to learn a theory/model in the education phase which convincingly contrasts a particular theory learned in the instruction phase. For example: if the theory acquired in instruction has been *the effectiveness of economic incentives on people's results* (adopted in many organizations but not all), a theory could be learned on the danger of economic incentives, demonstrating that they can reduce people's performance, whether they are managers, clerks or blues collars. I proposed four theoretical explanations which sustain the negativity of economic

incentives and there are several real cases which seem to prove it, even though as a professor and a consultant I teach incentive policies to my students and suggest them to my clients. An interesting benchmarking has been made in a business unit of a German chemical company, checking the results and the social climate before and after the introduction of an incentive system. The program was superimposed on an already existing and successful system of no incentives (the salary levels were obviously different but not linked to the punctual yearly results, built on other more general factors like seniority, education, position, etc). Both the economic results and the social climate worsened and excuse me for not entering into detail but one case like this is enough to alert our theoretical and practical attitudes. As another example **creativity**, so often invoked in organizations, should also find its counter theory. Rudolph Otto (1923), a German philosopher and theologian refers to the concept of *creatural spirit*, as the opposite of *creativity*. If in the creativity process we generate, we create, within the *creatural spirit* we receive, we are open to the message instead of producing the message. Most creative people in organizations say in private that they both receive and produce, that they feel both *creator* and *created* when they get new ideas or concepts in their fields (from fashion to high technology, to arts or simply in problem solving).

In this line of thought, every theory  $T_i$ , received in the instruction phase, should find a counter theory  $\underline{T}_i$ , which contrasts but cannot remove the theory  $T_i$ ; they become *mutual opponents*.

#### **4. The Black Box as opposed to managerial theories and practices**

I will now introduce the Black Box concept as a *counter theory* which could be the opponent of most classic managerial theoretical models and methodologies assimilated by managers during the instruction phase of their Gaussian learning curve.

Inside the Black Box we can imagine the essence of a human being personality.

The Black Box contains the richness and the variety of the personal characteristics, motivations, potential etc, in a few words his / her personal and professional profile, with positive and negative aspects.

The Black Box approach follows a particular paradigm, founded upon three operational axioms (behavioral directions):

- 1. It is impossible to understand people's behavior at individual and social level, whatever the amount of information on them is*
- 2. It is impossible to predict their future behavior, which is independent from all previous performances*
- 3. There are no cause-effect links between what we do on the input (our behavior) and the output (their subsequent behavior)*

The graphic representation of this model is as follows (Figure 5)

#### **The Black Box representation**



***Figure 5: The Black Box representation***

According to most organizational psychologists the three Black Box founding axioms deny the reasons for their professional existence. Some remarks have been made when the Black Box was

presented to the Academic world, such as “I spent my life trying to demonstrate the very opposite...”.

The managerial communities, where the data have been gathered since 1996, reacted initially with surprise, a sense of astonishment but eventually a few of them recognised the practical and innovative aspects of this model and others declared they were using this approach without a clear awareness and in a non scientific way. Angela, a manager in a services organization in Arizona, described in this way her form of *inevitable Black Box*: “I didn’t have the time and the chance to choose my collaborators for a mission that couldn’t be procrastinated and they were a mixture of very different national cultures: Europeans, South Americans, Africans and from the Far East. I crossed my fingers and I passed over these differences. The result has been extremely positive, a miracle, but I don’t think it will happen again”. I’m afraid that this miracle would be impossible with a deep understanding of their personal and national characteristics. It needed the very risk that trying to explore the Black Box inner world would have removed or reduced.

#### **4.1 Black Box clashes with the managerial procedures**

The implication of the Black Box principles are apparently clashing with the most ordinary practices and theories of people management. For example, according to the first postulate, **do not understand**, an interview to select the right person for the right job is a waste of time (and money) if made to qualify the interviewed. It could be made instead for completely different reasons, for example establishing trust between the two people or defining the terms of an agreement (whose respect, for the Black Box, is impossible to predict. Black Box doesn’t like contracts).

Furthermore, the large and accurate work of the Hofstede’s school on national differences (Hofstede, 1991) and its wide application will not be useful if not harmful, if its aim is to prepare managers to deal with different cultures. For the second statement, **do not predict**, the

search for potential in future managers is not helpful to create the new leaders' generation on organizations. The nowadays diffused practice, which in some Companies is nearly an obsession, to individuate as early as possible the future attitudes and performances of the most promising collaborators and the consequent development plans (Bournois, Derr & Roussillon, 2002) will again not only be impossible but to be avoided. It would reduce the overall potential of the organization.

For the third statement, the denial of **cause effect** mechanism, people's performance are uncorrelated or indifferent to all the widely adopted incentive policies and plans, causing however, a loss of economic resources, which happened in the German case. Changing people's behavior would also be out of control, as any intervention (input) can be associated to any output. Even the likelihood of events cannot be influenced as probability has no citizenship in the Black Box vision. A remark that managers generally make during the description of the Black Box is that it is exactly the opposite of what they do and are asked (and instructed) to do.

Of course, the Black Box model doesn't rend a good educational service to a young mind which is still in the instruction phase. Its power has been evident with managers with an experienced career, probably when they need to revise the first part of their managerial learning curve and professional life. They welcomed Black Box as a "breeze of liberty within the managerial web of duties and compulsive rituals". The initial desperation for the deregulation carried by the Black Box and the managerial power deprivation was then followed by a sense of emptiness, like the Japanese *mu*. This vacuum acted as a gradient, allowing new events, which had no room in the previous context; everything was too determined by the constraints of rational comprehension, the self fulfilling prophecies: the withdrawal of creativity. They declared that it was important to have a moment of truce from the growing *group think*, whose risk in decision-making has been

evidenced by several authors (Janis, 1989; Moorhead, Neck & West, 1998). In this sense Black Box would act as an antidote on this groups syndrome.

#### **4.2 One Black Box law, the Unique Event**

Although it seems a total cancellation of behavioral laws, the Black Box model implies one rule: *every time the input changes and the next input is new for the person (an **unique event** for that Black Box), the output is still unpredictable and unmanageable but the attention of the person for the next inputs is much higher.* The effect is temporary. This can be verified by any manager: when he shows a behavior which was not expected because it was never adopted till that moment, the response could range from negative to positive reactions or a vigilant expectation but for sure the sensorial and cognitive apparatus of collaborators was highly enhanced. It is the effect of the unique event. It is easy to verify how Black Box (i.e. the ignorance of the person's characteristics), makes the happening of the unique event easier. An immediate application is in change management: when we want to trigger and foster changes in people behavior (or the whole organizational culture), the lack of information on them and the consequent unpredictability can help behavioral modifications because the high level of their attention (due to unique event effect) and the increased variety of inputs on them. This is what we term *conditions of sensitivity and flexibility.* They both refer to the input, as the output is out of control, as per the axiom 3. The **sensitivity** is higher both for the manager who wishes the change and the collaborators (the Black Boxes).

The **flexibility** of the person interacting with the Black Box increases as the range of possible behavior is broader, providing we ignore the Black Box content (consider how we limit our possibilities of interaction if we are aware of the culture, religion and nationality of a person). If you remark at this point that the risk will be unbearable, this is another matter which has to do with the comprehensible need for reducing the anxiety.

### 4.3 Organisational examples

When some Companies implement job rotation in offices and departments (sometimes it is enough to rotate the boss of that group), we create by an organizational act a situation of Black Box. If the new boss is brave enough, he takes very little information regarding the new collaborators and maybe postpones the reading of their CV.

An unusual receptivity is guaranteed and some behavior lost for years now becomes possible *again*, as not conditioned by the understanding and the predictability, the killers of the so precious unique event. The only defect is that the nature of change is not determinable: it happens (Capra, 1975), according to the third postulate (no cause/ effect link). But if you like uncertainties and surprises, this is also a way to revitalise professional and personal relationships. When I asked some IBM managers about the reasons for some unnecessary organizational modifications (at least for me) of roles or positions I was told: “something changes, we cannot say what. Some lazy people become more committed, other outstanding performers slow down, but the attention and the spirit of expectation is perceivably very high. The efficiency, of course, diminishes but as long as people are attentive and easy to change, even if not always in the preferred direction, we have a team which can manage better the challenges of our business”. In another American multinational, the HR department was suggesting periodic rotation of team leaders in order to “reduce his level of competence”. Paradoxically, the new assignment was in a job where he was slightly less competent than in the previous one, where he had achieved a high standard of performance. This moderate lack of competence was creating interesting effects on the team dynamics: the general pro-activity used to raise and innovations were more probable, together with the sense of belonging. On the contrary, we have a plethora of examples of super experts, recruited to solve critical problems who themselves have been *the problem*. Has the luck of

beginners got something to do with Black Box? All these cases of interesting success had one factor in common: the people involved in these events were professionally mature, committed to the company and to their jobs, with an evident motivation to contribute but probably a bit exhausted by a over dated routine. We also saw examples of performances, motivation and attitude improvement in people defined “hopeless”, in term of chances for active contribution. The arrival of the new boss unexpectedly resurrected the hopes, the pride or the will of those *sleeping collaborators*. One boss said: “ I want men and women, not their papers. I’ll read them when I have time”. An exorbitant charisma by his employees! Interestingly enough, in the field of medicine the arrival of a new doctor in a long term care department has been associated to some “impossible” recovery of chronic patients.

#### **4.4 Black Box in cultural and national differences**

In multicultural situations, where it is normally considered precious to obtain the information about the cultural determinants, stereotypes or unbreakable rules, the Black Box approach sometimes offered interesting evidence of its power. An European manager, belonging to a high tech company in partnership with a Japanese corporation, refused to be *instructed*, unlike all his colleagues, on the basic rules of Japanese business and daily life (there was a sort of Company manual for this sake). He justified his refusal saying he was an engineer and that he didn’t need anything but the mastery of the technical aspects. When he came back to Europe, he reported at the end of his mission that he’d been told that everybody had been curious about his behavior: his way would not be acceptable if he were Japanese; they let it go as he was a foreigner. But what created a halo of charisma and strong attention around him was that his behavior had been very dissimilar to the one of his predecessors, irritating some Japanese colleagues and delighting others; however they were all very attentive! An interesting effect, often experienced,

is that the ignorance of a foreign culture, although associated to a high risk, gives the ignorant a few privileges which are not granted to the natives.

In general, we could say that the Black Box was in all these cases a temporary deactivation of the ordinary managerial rules.

## **5. Primary innocence**

In all the examples we have provided, the Black Box effect has been in terms of advantage of not knowing, not predicting, not trying to control (the three Black Box pillars). These *a-priori advantages* are sometimes visible by negotiators and mediators; their power is (also) in ignoring facts and sentiments which are too engraved in the involved actors. A good mediator, like a good lawyer, sometimes refuses to know some personal events which punctuated the past as they could reduce his sensitivity and bound the range of manoeuvre. This status is called **Primary Innocence** and can be obtained and maintained with a Black Box attitude of not understanding, predicting and influencing. This primary innocence, like in the IBM case, can be created with an organizational act, in a physical way. The consequent question is now: can we recover the initial condition with the *same* people?

### **5.1 A secondary innocence?**

Can we deal with a collaborator, a customer, a boss, whoever we know well, too well, after long time and intense experience (negative and positive) as if he is a *fresh* person? This is the **Secondary Innocence** and it is another form of Black Box, to recreate the mystery of the original encounter. The advantage is very high as it is also the difficulty to produce this status. Family psychotherapists noted that some couples got to the extent claiming their marriage had finished because it had been consumed by routine. The solution was, at times, to help the members of that exhausted family to split in possible peace and start new lives for both, open to start over with new partners. But other couples were able to restart a new life with the same person, reactivating

the enthusiasm, the energy and the old spark of their enchanting initial phase. This was generally achieved through an interesting mechanism: one of them, without informing his/ her partner, recreated the condition of mystery and expectations of the origin, a sort of *reset* of the dense learning of the other. This new condition was inexorably changing also the partner's attitudes and behaviors. It was a case of secondary innocence and some people described the consequent effect as "even more intense than the first time". It could be an interesting hypothesis: the secondary innocence is more productive than the primary. Professionally the application would be wide and fruitful. Imagine refreshing a bored team not through changing people but by the secondary innocence of its manager (or of some crucial members). Or how collaborators could renew the opportunity (and the risks, they cannot be split) to start over with the old, too well known, impossible to change, boss.

Or how very compromised situations where the only chance would appear to be a physical change (primary innocence) could be neutralised again by a simple, unilateral mental act of one party....the secondary innocence, opening a future where everything is possible, *again*.

Our culture finds it difficult to create the secondary innocence; still some very charismatic managers have this power, which is neither forgetting the past nor pretending that nothing happened. The past remained in the memory as *datum* but had been deactivated as *effectiveness*.

In terms of our Gaussian learning curve the secondary innocence is the result of the education slope. In the initial phase, before the ascent of the learning curve, there is the privilege of the primary innocence, like children are always granted. But *educated* adults are more interesting and powerful than kids, as collaborators and even more as people to live with; hence the importance to practice the Secondary Innocence.

## **6. Strategies to foster and maintain the primary innocence**

There are three basic directions:

### **I) Avoiding the acquisition of unnecessary or preliminary information**

All the information which is needed by a healthy business conduct (like economic, technical and legal data) are obviously to be obtained, but personal factors like personality aspects, recent or old past events which involved the actors, feelings, psychological profiles like test results could be avoided, to maintain the Primary Innocence advantages.

### **II) Job rotation**

Changing places, team, people, customers, suppliers and colleagues create the Black Box situation, as we shown.

### **III) Cultivating more than a single context**

For example working in a matrix system where in the same day or week a person can be involved in different places, people, commitments (even Companies). This helps a moderate neutralisation, deemphasizing too intense relationships or belonging.

As we said, every primary innocence has a modest duration and the effect is weakened by its reiteration.

### **7. Secondary innocence; *sign* and *significate***

The most rigorous way to explain the secondary innocence could be represented by the Japanese-Chinese- ideogram we described in this introduction, the *mu* or *wu* ( *nothing, without* and similar forms of *re acquired absence*). Before my explanation, for most of you, particularly Westerners, that *sign* was just ink on paper. It was a carrier of a meaning still unknown, the *significate*. Once explained (the instruction up slope) it lost its innocence, it acquired a meaning (actually one of the several meanings, *significates*, associated to the same *sign*) and now you are contaminated, your flexibility is reduced with respect to that sign: its interpretation is nearly compulsive. Are you able to see it again as the original (generative) sign even when you know its meaning? This is the core and the outcome of the secondary innocence process: to pass from the

*acquired meaning to the original sign* (by the way, this process is the opposite of understanding). In other words, you now know and keep the meaning but it cannot condition your behavior any longer. This is the **deactivation of the significate**. People who had in the past repetitive failures or successes (the trap is the same) will lead you to draw inevitable conclusions about them and to predict their future performances; you will then be tempted to adopt strategies to change those *inevitable* behaviors (remember the self fulfilling prophecy). The manager who can see all these events as mere *signs* will have an extra gear for possibilities, in variety and intensity, denied to the *ordinary* manager. And he needs this virtue at times, although not necessarily always...

### **7.1 A few strategies for the secondary innocence**

There are so far several strategies to obtain the secondary innocence, which are suitable to our managerial culture. Let's take the case of a negative experience: a manager has been unjustly removed from the job, as a consequence of unfair manoeuvres by colleagues or justly for his unforgivable bad conduct. The instinctive solution could be to leave such an organization and recreate a neutral terrain of chances for himself elsewhere, as the old context would be too contaminated (for primary innocence regeneration). Or, he could adopt a procedure called the **SARAH process**. SARAH is an acronym to describe a step by step re-evaluation of that negative experience. It is based on a sort of educational curve concerning the lived event. If we reanalyse, more properly we reproduce at the rational but also at the emotional level the previous experience we have some possibilities to process it, in order to detach its limiting influence. SARAH is a simplification of the *Grievance Process* (Bowlby, 1969 & Kubler-Ross, 1969), typical in some psychotherapeutic approaches, one of them is the Gestalt Therapy (Perls, 1977).

In simple situations it can be self applied, in more severe cases it would need the support of a third party, the expert. The process follows this path: *Shock, Anger, Rejection, Acceptance, Help*.

Briefly, the *Shock* phase consists in living the first emotion provoked by the strong negative event again: a temporary black out of our sensorial system, according to a typical defensive reaction. In this phase we can re-experience it, this time with the awareness of a known experience. *Anger* is the emotion that follows the realisation of that negative event: living that anger again is the second phase of the process. *Rejection* are the forms of defensive denial or refusal of personal responsibility about the original event. This phase lives that denial with the distance of awareness. *Acceptance* is the result of a personal reflection and reorganization of the event, with the new data and lucidity which we can afford after the first experience.

*Help* consists in abandoning pride and defensiveness and opening to people who have been involved in the original experience, more or less directly (sometimes metaphorically), asking them for a contribution for a deeper and more objective understanding of the original event.

A sense of gratitude to that experience, even though it was so negative, is the clue of the success in the process. In some ways, the original negative experience was part of the *instructing* curve; the SARAH process would then be the relevant *educating* curve.

Another process for building the secondary innocence is described in the technique of **reframing** (Bandler & Grinder, 1982) or in the concept and associated method of the **OK Corral** by the followers of Eric Berne's School (Joines & Stewart, 1987). The basic process of the OKC is the reestablishment of a status of acceptance of the other and the self. There is no need that the other person proceeds in the same way or is even aware, the process is unilateral.

## **7.2 Contribution from the eastern cultures**

On the border between West and East, *meditation* (Goleman, 1988) is quite an effective approach to the secondary innocence. I noticed this private practice by several managers who had a strong ability to innovate and to face difficulties. Recently this approach has been adopted in high potential training programs by STMicroelectronics, a semiconductor company, (Italy, by the

Fudenji Zen temple). From a technical and conceptual point of view, the base of all these processes for the secondary innocence is the transformation of the meaning (*significate*) into its *sign* (Varela, Thomson & Rosch, 1991). I realized that the oriental world with its philosophies and sciences, which are millenary but paradoxically relegated to the level of cultural curiosities or anthropological rituals, can be of great help for this new paradigm. When I introduced the Black Box in a Buddhist monastery, the attendees completely agreed with the first two axioms (don't understand, don't predict) but declared a conceptual problem in accepting the third one (no cause-effect). Curiously enough, our psychologists and management consultants have been very creative and effective in finding techniques to deactivate the negative experience, but we don't have the same abundance of methods to get rid of the positive experiences; on the contrary, some managers use to emphasize them, perhaps to stimulate motivation and sense of belonging of their collaborators or their own. But they are the same burden as the positive ones (Watts, 1995), they reduce the space for possible changes and innovation and become a groove where our wheels can be more and more encapsulated. Success has the same (if not more) risks than failures (Beecher & Beecher 1982).

## **8. Situations and conditions which recommend the adoption of Black Box**

We experienced the application of the Black Box in these cases and contexts:

- **Multicultural situations**, where knowing in advance can easily generate prejudices or cultural arrogance.
- **Negotiation and mediation**, where the information already acquired, which is sometimes from second hand, could reduce the variety of options.
- **Conflict management**, as the counterpart could perceive an aprioristic hostility or an opportunistic indulgence, transforming a direct conflict which could be sane into a pathological one.

- **Hiring people** or allocating people on jobs.

Although we developed extremely sophisticated forms for interviews or psychological tests, if we want to expand the contribution potential of an employee or of a manager, the lack of information could avoid the self fulfilling prophecy effect. This is particularly useful when the environment is so subject to change that a job description is not realistic as the work requirement is unstable.

- The “**mission impossible case**”, the person with whom everything has been tried and failed; here the Black Box could be a last chance of interaction with the problematic person. One participant at a managerial seminar reported that one day he insulted his customer, with whom he had been working for months, trying to follow him with any possible requests, unsuccessfully. In no sales manual, at least those I read, is this a recommendable strategy, but in that case things changed from that day on for the sales manager, positively according to his report. The effect was not in the insult but rather in seeing the customer beyond his role.
- **Education** and generally pedagogy, from children to CEOs.
- Perhaps also **medicine** could find some interesting approaches from this vision, both at the diagnostic and therapeutic levels.

In all these cases, both the primary and secondary innocence approach can be applied; the second one, although more complex and difficult, is more intense and effective than the primary innocence. Of course Black Box is not the most recommendable approach every time one of these situations is presented. The old classic, consolidated and more reassuring techniques and logics are always there with their long experience of success.

We simply recommend to have the Black Box as a further option which will let you proceed where others will have to stop.

### **8.1 A rule of the thumb**

Every problem has its own characteristics, but a general criterion to decide in favour of Black Box adoption could be the amount of *risk and opportunity* (they are inseparable) associated to a specific situation. If the risk/opportunity is small-medium, the classic ways are heuristically to be preferred. But if they have a dramatic intensity and are associated to the need for a decisive innovation, beyond our ordinary conditions, a sort of quantum leap, the Black Box approach is more productive. Be prepared in this case to face a very strong change, whose nature cannot be directed (but eventually be managed with the classic methods). By the way, this is in agreement with axioms 2 and 3 of this model.

### **9. Conclusion**

This paper doesn't aim to be an iconoclastic manifesto which tries to compete and defeat the monumental and precious work made by academics, theorists, experts and managers to tackle the intangible human dimension, the unquestionable domain of the consolidated science of Organizational Behavior and of other management disciplines. It is rather an approach which tries to walk with the previous ones, in order to "watch each other" and keep our sensitivity and flexibility high.

## References

- Bandler, R., & Grinder, J. (1982). *Reframing*. Boulder, CO: Real People Press.
- Beecher, M., & Beecher, W. (1982). *Beyond success and failure*. Camarillo, CA: De Worss & C.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss*. Cambridge: Basic books.
- Bournois, F., Derr, B., & Roussillon, S. (2002). *Cross Cultural approaches to leadership development*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.
- Capra, F. (1975). *Tao of physics*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Culture and organizations*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Goleman, D. (1988). *The Meditative Mind*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam.
- Janis, I., L. (1989). *Crucial Decisions*. New York: Free Press.
- Kubler Ross, E. (1969). *On Death & Dying*. New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone.
- Moorhead, G., Neck, C., & West, M. (1998). The tendency toward defective Decision Making within Self Managing teams: the relevance of Groupthink for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Organizational behavior and human decision processes*. 73, 327-351.
- Otto, R. (1923). *The Idea of the Holy*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Perls, F., S., Hefferkine, R., & Goodman, P. (1977). *Gestalt Therapy: excitement and growth in the human personality*. New York: Julian Press.
- Reps, P., & Senzaki, N. (1957). *Zen flesh, Zen bones: a collector of Zen and pre Zen writings*. Boston: Tuttle.
- Robèrt, K. H., (2002). *The natural step story*. Gabriola Island, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Stewart, J., & Joines, V. (1987). *T.A. Today: A New Introduction to Transactional Analysis*. Nottingham: Lifespace.
- Vance, C. (1993). *Mastering management education*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Varela, F., Thomson, E., & Rosch, E. (1991). *The embodied mind. Cognitive Science and human experience.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Watts, A., & Watts, M. (1995). *Buddhism: the religion of no religion.* Tuttle Publishing, Boston.